

The Wedding

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The wedding came quicker than anyone, except perhaps the bride and groom, expected. There was talk, but, then again, there is always talk, and since neither marrying party seemed inclined to give attention to such gossip, it eventually died down. This silence may also have been on account of a separate rumor that the Best Man was a former streetfighter and had a personalized, 14-karat gold switchblade hidden in his right suit pocket. Throughout the entire wedding, truth reared its deadly head only once, allowing gossip such as that of the street-fighting groomsman to run wild. Guests were thoroughly amused while the bride and groom remained completely ignorant, a combination resulting in this wedding being one of the best of the year.

The groom delivered his vows with a series of clicks and caws in imitation of the mating calls of the rare birds he collects stuffed and with which he decorated the couple's home before it began to look like a small-scale replica of the Amazon rainforest, and the collection had to be delegated to a single room which the groom called his "Man Nest." That the bride laughed at this 'clever' bit of 'wordplay' was the greatest proof anyone could find of her love for her husband. The bride delivered her vows as an anthology of her favorite sonnets recited from memory for approximately twenty minutes before she was interrupted by the Bible falling from the minister's hand and the guttural gasp of her great

aunt startling awake (then gasping once more at the sacrilegious sight- "What bad luck!"). That the groom held her gaze for the entire recitation, only yawning once, is the greatest proof anyone could find of his love for his wife. The rest of the ceremony was short since the minister, embarrassed after his faux pas and wishing desperately to remove himself from the attention of every person in attendance- except perhaps that lovely, plum-wearing woman in the fourth row, sped through his speeches, abridging verses in a way an elderly man in the audience would later call sacrilegious. The rings were exchanged (both seemingly simple, but, in fact, made of cement), and the fated words- "You may kiss the bride" - were said, but the couple did not kiss. They stared at each other with wide eyes, and, as one, looked to the minister. Neither had heard a word after "I now pronounce you husband and wife" and were so stunned by the step they had taken together that they began to laugh wildly and fell into each other's arms. They did kiss, of course, but it was ten minutes later on the road to the reception after they realized that they had somehow forgotten to in front of the room full of witnesses. The bride wondered if this meant the marriage was null; the groom told her that she thinks too hard. She agreed but kept wondering.

The rest of the wedding party was taken to the reception hall in an orange stretch limousine and the guests were picked up and carried over in eleven

different cars called via three different ride-share apps (and one phone home to an uncle with an SUV and a very liberal definition of early retirement). Not one person on the ride over mentioned the irregularity of the vows nor the death-knell boom of the Bible hitting the floor, but more than one person called mind to a single dark red spot on the bottom right corner of the bride's veil and speculated on what could possibly have caused it.

The reception was simple. There was a hall with light brown wooden floors and there was a table where forty envelopes and seven gift bags sat and there was a cake already cut into slices. There were no forks, but there were three hundred spoons, and that was good enough. Every source of light had been covered with red tulle, meant to invoke the loving energy of Valentine's Day, but which instead created a slightly menacing aura that even the disco ball and the jazz band (borrowed from the local middle school) could not ease. Nonetheless did people dance and play at joviality. Some even managed to have a good time, bathing beneath lights blinded by love. Tinted by the fabric, everyone's skin turned pink. It was an entire party wearing rose-colored glasses, and such a place could only result in approximately eight quiet love affairs in various closets and bathrooms (even one under a table in the main hall!) throughout the evening. Never once did anyone notice the bride and groom out of sight. Never once were they spotted standing more than an arm's reach away from each other. Some called it sweet, others overbearing, and many never thought about it at all.

Among those whose thoughts never deigned to touch the happy couple were a young girl in a yellow dress featuring a dangerously large number of ruffles and an old man in a dark blue suit and a light blue undershirt blighted by a similar problem to the girl's dress. The girl was not looking at the man with confusion about how she ended up in a

corner of the reception hall with this stranger, in fact she hardly looked his way at all, but the man was looking intently at the girl, mostly at her chin for reasons no passerby could guess. He was talking. She was not. He told her, "People are desperate to tell you who they are, but you are not desperate to believe them." (The man's daughter was a self-proclaimed psychic with daddy issues not quite akin to any found in a run-of-the-mill psychology textbook. She had not been invited to the wedding.) The girl gave a halfhearted nod. For all the strange man's insight, he was incapable of seeing that the girl did not hear a word he had spoken because she was entirely distracted by the maid of honor and three bridesmaids hiding in the opposite corner of the room pouring hand sanitizer into holographic shot glasses. Their smiles were glossy and the girl in the ruffled, yellow dress couldn't help but picture them in the nude, dipping into an ocean of rubbing alcohol. She imagined licking their palms and her tongue being overcome by the metallic. She imagined how clean they were and felt an undying desire to soil them. Her thoughts were loud and pounding and they made the vein in her forehead bulge slightly, but the old man was so transfixed by her chin (Did she perhaps have a zit there?) that he remained oblivious to every sin she was begging God to let her commit. He continued to talk, even describing to her in extreme detail the circumstances of an imminent death, and she continued not to listen until they were interrupted by the old man's fourth wife, the great aunt of the bride who wore large 'pearls' made of ivory around her neck, a single braided red thread around her ankle, and a bright red dress that hung loose on her body, threatening constantly to slip off. She tapped her husband slightly on the shoulder and, when he turned to her, they began grabbing at each other fervently, bumping into the wall and ripping the curtain nearest them ever so slightly. The young

girl was startled from her thoughts when the pair tripped over the leg of a chair and bumped into her. She quickly ran from them to Table 8 where she had stashed her clutch beneath the tablecloth - she was struck by a sudden, inescapable urge to write and needed her pen and a blank spot of wall where she could implant herself into something more permanent than her body. She had words stuck inside of her: "Bed," "Grass," "Nails," and "Puppetry." In the middle of her path to the perfectly empty space on the East wall she had spotted stood the bride, her face nearly touching the groom's as they explained to a small child that they had not thought to purchase bubbles for their guests and that they were very sorry. The child and the bride were sobbing outwardly, and a small, salty puddle was growing on the floor beneath them. Three tears fell down the groom's face, and the girl in the yellow dress was certain she was the only one in the entire room to notice until she saw the bride place her thumbs on his cheeks and wipe them, quickly replacing his tears with the salty evidence of her own by kissing his cheek. The child walked away. As the young girl passed by the emotional pair, she noticed a second splotch on the bride's veil three inches above the first. She had half a mind to tell the bride to be more careful with her clothing but thought better of it. After all, the woman was already crying.

Hours later, three-fourths of the champagne had been drunk and the young girl was still scribbling words on the wall, though. She had been forced along the wall three feet to the left of her starting point by the sheer volume of her inspiration. Now she was slouched over her words, so engrossed she did not notice the end of her dress was stuck under the chair of an old woman (who was old at all, but who was two weeks from celebrating her fifteen-year anniversary with Virginia Slims) in a large purple hat who was avidly listening to another woman who had

just returned from the lady's room.

"I heard this awful screaming from the hallway, and I never want to intrude but I was just about to wet myself and my dress is not wont to hide anything-" she gestures to her skin-tight, nude dress; the woman in the purple hat frowned "-so I opened the bathroom door, and it made this horrible squeaking sound that cut me right through to my core. I expected to hear the screams again, but there was only silence, so I walked to a stall. But as I was sitting there, I heard an awful sort of whimper coming from the stall next to me, like someone drowning in their own breath or being strangled by their tongue. It was the sound of a body begging to escape itself. I left immediately." She opened her bag and began searching through it. "Do you have any hand sanitizer? I seem to have lost mine."

The woman in the purple hat shook her head. "Screams in the bathroom! Makes one wonder what all is in that cake, eh?" She pointed her chin to the sky and pushed her chest out as she rested her two-inch long, teal acrylic nails on her empty plate - every aspect of her posture was beseeching all those around her to ask her what her secret was, and she had her answer ready: "Oh, honey, it's just genetics." Then she would wink, hinting at the lie. She hadn't eaten a full meal in fourteen years. Much to her chagrin no one asked her how she managed to keep such a slim figure- indeed, no one even asked her what her dress size was at all! It was all so irritating, she nearly stood up and went to get a piece of cake, but she stopped herself. Discipline. She adjusted her rather heavy hat.

No one else at the table was paying this conversation (if it could be called that) any mind, because the flower girl, who had snuck her pet hamster into the reception in her basket, had begun tossing her petals around the room in a big hoorah to the apparent delight of the bride's grandmother, who was quite high on morphine. This was all well

and good and terribly entertaining until the girl, apparently forgetting about the rodent hidden beneath the flowers in the infinitely distracted way of children, reached particularly deep in her basket and flung her hamster across the room. It landed on Table Three in front of the groom's old college roommate and immediately began having a well-deserved heart attack. The college roommate did his best to coax it back to life, but there was no hope. The flower girl, unaware, continued throwing petals. The grandmother of the bride, aware, continued clapping.

"Well, that's one official death at this wedding." A hundred-dollar bill was exchanged between two old men with shockingly similar receding hairlines. They then stood in unison and left the reception hall, remembered by no one but immortalized in a single photograph on a professor's digital camera that he didn't remember taking.

The bride's sister studied abroad in France her senior year of college and, during her three-week stint at a city two hours outside Marseilles, became pregnant with a Frenchman's child. To this day, she has no idea which Frenchman. She came home, oblivious to all gestation, and nine months later produced a child she named Madeline. Two of the longest years of the sister's life later, Madeline crawled across the dance floor in the reception hall, her chubby legs and tiny hands turning blacker and blacker with dirt until she found the perfect surface on which to wipe them: the hem of the bride's dress. Feeling a pull, the bride turned and grabbed the child, but the damage had already been done. Five spots of red and one smack of dust, she counted. Oh well. Madeline giggled in the bride's arms, reveling in the view from five feet up and the bouncing way the bride moved her to the beat of the music. The bride smiled at Madeline's smile, then she stopped and moved quite suddenly, although with a very reasonable diaper-related excuse, from the dance

floor. In the hallway near the bathroom, the bride sat Madeline on the floor then knelt before her, flinching as she lowered herself to the ground.

"I will start by saying that I love you and that I will assume you love me as well, so I have to tell you something. It's not meant to damper your joy or your innocence, but to strike down your naïveté before it strikes you down. I want to protect you, do you understand?"

Madeline blinked.

"Okay. I love my husband - oh my God he's my husband!" The bride smiled to herself. "I love my husband more than I have the words to describe, but he is soft and he is fragile and I am not. I am a blade, and he is easy to cut. I want to tell you now, Madeline, to scare you from ever growing up to be like me: I am filing down my edges, so I don't hurt him. I will break myself into pieces and sell myself for parts before I mar his skin, and that is exactly what I am having to do."

Madeline tried to get away from the bride, perhaps to the empty container of hand sanitizer on the floor two yards away or the fake aloe plant but the window (she hadn't decided yet), but the bride grabbed her before she could make her escape.

"Just one second." The bride pulled Madeline right up to her, pressing their foreheads together. For a moment she entertained fantasies of motherhood, but she stopped herself. She had to. "You have to know how badly it hurts. You have to know some wounds don't heal. They stay open and oozing. I can't tell you not to fall in love, 'cause it's one of the greatest things you will ever do, but, God, please don't grow up sharp. Be dull and be soft or fall into some unforgiving love with steel."

The bride stared at Madeline for a while, waiting for some acknowledgment of what she had just said, some proof of comprehension, but Madeline didn't even look in her direction. After fifteen seconds, the bride let her go. She scuttled off immediately, and

the bride was left alone, leaning against a wall facing the bathroom, hiding from the masses and her new husband at her own wedding. She stayed this way until she heard the tell-tale click of heels against tile getting too close, then she immediately stood and feigned normalcy as she walked back out into the party. The very short woman in a black dress and very tall heels turned to watch the bride walk away, having been worried by the look on her face, but that worry turned to fear when she turned around and discovered a deep red line down the back of the wedding dress. A phantom spine. The woman closed her gaping mouth and walked into the restroom, unsure of what to do.

The rest of the evening went off without major issues. People danced poorly to mediocre songs and laughed loudly at mediocre jokes and ate ravenously a cake that was actually quite good. It was half past midnight when the newlyweds said their goodbyes and made their way to a limousine under a barrage of birdseed. The groom opened the door for his bride then quickly ran around the limousine to get inside and help pull her and her large dress into the small cab. The girl in the yellow dress saw him holding her face in his hands. She saw the moonlight reflect off his teeth as he smiled. She saw him kiss her, slowly and softly before the bride threw her arms around him, hiding her face in his neck, and the car sped off. Once again was the girl overwhelmed by letters, but this time in the form of a single word: "Mine." She felt a curious urge to engrave it into her skin. After the married pair's exit, the party quickly dissipated, the exhausted and the drunk making their way to various hotels, motels, and relatives' houses by means they would hardly remember come morning.

The reception hall was empty. The tables were still covered in half-drunk drinks and empty plates, their covers stained and off-center. No breeze blew through the hall, making the curtains move. There

were words written on every wall that, together, while lacking any discernible connection, read like so many poems. The liveliness of the room was gone, all its humanity resigned to dried tear drops on the hardwood floors and the echo of a laugh. It was then, in the aftermath of the celebration, when the guests were still in post-party purgatory, with their ears ringing and their feet begging to dance despite their soreness, that the telephone rang.



The mother of the groom spent much of her adult life believing that she could not have children. After spending several nights sitting with her husband on their bathroom floor in their tiny apartment, holding hands and staring at pregnancy test after pregnancy test, she decided that pregnancy tests were far too small to control their entire future. Then she and her husband went to a fertility clinic, and she discovered that there was something even smaller holding her future by its throat. It almost ruined her, but she survived. It was four years later in September that she didn't get her period, and she was too scared to hope, too scared even to tell the man sleeping next to her at night. So she waited. The same thing happened the next month and the next month, so she finally felt ready to tell her husband. He fell to his knees. They were in the doctor's office that afternoon. They were going to have a baby. The next six months were a whirlwind of vomit, anticipation, and preparation until, finally, he was born. She had never loved anything with any kind of immediacy, but the minute she held her baby boy in her arms, she loved him in this new and inexplicable way; she would do anything for him.

The mother of the groom wore her hair in a short bob and had bangs that she often pinned back because of their pesky habit of getting lost in her eyes. She had brown eyes, blonde eyelashes that she never covered with mascara, pink cheeks, and dark lips. Her shirts were coated in complex

floral designs, and her pants were always from a particular department store she would not tell anyone the name of. For the wedding, she had gone to get her hair done in a braid like a crown around her head and her husband told her she looked like a milkmaid. It made her laugh. She wore a long, sleeveless dress decorated with orange orchids and silver sequins with two-inch heels the same blue-green color of her husband's eyes. He didn't realize the connection, but that didn't bother her. She was too happy. She remembered when her son had met his now bride only six months prior, how he had told her the story of their meeting with flushed cheeks and a grin exposing all of his teeth; she remembered when he proposed, how he asked her what kind of ring to get and she told him to ask the woman he was buying the ring for; she remembered when they

almost broke up like it was yesterday and when they got back together like it was five minutes ago. She remembered asking if he was sure. She remembered his response. Before the wedding, she held her son's face in her two hands and told him she loved him and good luck. She hugged him tightly, then left the room to join the rest of the guests. She was happy for him, undeniably so, but she was also desolate to lose him, which was what was happening, no matter what her husband may have told her. She didn't stay at the reception long, slipping out even before the cake was cut with a quick kiss on the cheek for her daughter-in-law and a rehearsed excuse for her son. She was reminded of the old cliché as she walked barefoot to her car, holding a heel in either hand: "If you love something, let it go." She was half asleep when the telephone rang.